Interdisciplinary Journal of Partnership Studies

Volume 2
Issue 1 *Spring*

Article 2

July 2015

A Conversation with Peter Senge: Transforming Organizational Cultures

Riane Eisler
Center for Partnership Studies

A CONVERSATION WITH PETER SENGE: TRANSFORMING ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURES

Interviewed by Riane Eisler, JD, PhD(hon)

Abstract

Riane Eisler talks with Peter Senge, internationally renowned expert on management and organizational leadership, about transforming organizational cultures from domination to partnership.

***Keywords*:** cultural transformation, learning organizations, systems thinking, domination, partnership, personal development, management, leadership

Riane Eisler: Thank you, Peter, for your willingness to be a part of this second issue of *The Interdisciplinary Journal of Partnership Studies*. I want to start by congratulating you on your important and highly influential work, which is so closely aligned with the cultural shift I have been working on. As you know, this journal is dedicated to gathering and publishing the best scholarship on the subject, as well as contributions from practitioners and others working to facilitate and accelerate this shift. The vision of our journal is "To share scholarship and create connections for cultural transformation to build a world in which all relationships, institutions, policies, and organizations are based on principles of partnership."

Peter Senge: It's a privilege and an honor to be part of this journal and what you are seeking to accomplish through it.

Eisler: Your book *The Fifth Discipline* has become a kind of "bible" for developing effective and humane organizational cultures. It shows the greater effectiveness of

these cultures in contrast to the traditional top-down command-and-control organizations. Do you think its success reflects a hunger for a shift away from domination systems?

Senge: Yes, there's no doubt in my mind about this. Around the world people see the increasing gap between the nature of the challenges we face in our societies and the capacities of traditional institutions, with their hierarchical and paternalistic management structures. Whether you look at the largest issues in the world, such as global climate destabilization, or the particular challenges of individual institutions in communities (for example, changing the culture of a particular business or school), this gap appears again and again. We are trying to accomplish changes that simply cannot be accomplished given the way we are going about it. It is sort of like trying to fly while you are in a boat. You need to understand the design principles of an airplane and you need to start to learn how to build such vehicles.

Eisler: The first major principle in your book is Personal Mastery. Can you tell us about that?

Senge: The essence of Personal Mastery is living your life as if you are creating it. It is quite natural for many of us, given the relentless signals we receive from our culture, to see our life as something that "happens to us" – to see all the problems, challenges, and things to which we need to react, and to completely miss the larger processes whereby we are shaping our lives. A wonderful mentor to me, Mary Catherine Bateson, once wrote a beautiful book titled *Composing a Life* (1989, New York: Grove/Atlantic). I think the spirit that Mary Catherine expressed in this book is precisely the shift we have talked about for years, from "a reactive-responsive orientation" to a "creative orientation". The person who inspired a lot of the particular tools and approaches we use in this area of Personal Mastery is Robert Fritz. Robert is an extraordinary lifelong student of the creative process, having started off as a musician (he used to play clarinet with Dave Brubeck), to becoming a

composer, painter, writer, and now movie-maker. Robert's lifelong interest is understanding the nature of the creative process, not as something esoteric or common to only a few gifted people, but as part of our birthright. Coming to understand and access these innate capacities to create our lives is the essence of the discipline of Personal Mastery.

Eisler: The second principle you write and teach about relates to Mental Models, especially the need to actively examine them and assess whether they make sense or whether a different mental model is needed. Can you explain that and how it relates to this journal, which in much of its content is telling a new and more hopeful story about what is possible?

Senge: The first fundamental error in our awareness is to take what we perceive as fact. This is very natural and, again, consistently reinforced by our culture. But nothing could be further from the truth. Human beings are not passive recording devices taking in external stimuli and objectively creating internal representations. While we might tend to think of ourselves in this way, it is fundamentally inaccurate, both from the standpoint of cognitive science and from biology. As human beings, we interact with our world, and out of that interaction bring forth the reality, in the words of the famous Chilean biologist Humberto Maturana. Maturana points out that no biological entity operates in the machine-like ways of a camera or an audio recorder. Instead, in our interactions with the world, we create perceptions, but we then mistake these perceptions for fact.

We came to use the term Mental Models over the years as a way of pointing to this basic process of human cognition or perception. In turn, we wanted to emphasize *Reflection,* the process whereby we think about our thinking, whereby we turn the mirror on our own ways of seeing in the world. Reflection is by its nature a process of humility. We go from thinking that what we think is true, to understanding that what we see is more or less what we see – and that this "seeing" is a construction shaped

by our culture, education, gender – literally all of the elements of our personal history. A woman sees a different reality than a man, due to our different gendered socialization. An engineer sees a different reality than a salesperson. A student sees a different reality than a teacher. And on and on. This is not good or bad, it is human. It does not reflect flaws, but the essence of what it means to be conscious.

Once we understand this, several things shift. First, we naturally become more humble, recognizing the contingency of our own awareness. Second, if we take this in, we develop a much healthier stance between advocacy and inquiry. It is natural to be an advocate. To be passionate about something, we naturally want to advocate in support of it. We have preferences. We want to see certain things exist in the world instead of others. All of this can be good – with one big exception. Often advocates become their own biggest source of limitation. In our passion to advocate for what we care about, we stop listening to others, and we fail to know the partnerships needed to realize our visions. So, if we can stay grounded in the limitations of our own awareness, then, by implication, we realize that our own ideas for how to accomplish what we care about will always be limited. Even our vision itself inherently reflects our personal stance in the world. This inevitably leads to an opening to being genuinely curious about how others see the world and how others think about what it will take to realize important goals. This opening to genuine curiosity about the thinking of others is the foundation for the collective disciplines of building Shared Vision, and Team Learning and Dialogue.

Eisler: Shared Vision is your third principle, and it involves developing a shared vision among team members of what they want to accomplish or create, which you note helps to give focus and energy for learning. How are participation and partnership important in developing shared vision? How do you see the role of the leader in this?

Senge: As we develop a genuine stance of curiosity, balancing inquiry and advocacy, we can genuinely contribute to processes of building shared vision, and our

understanding of the role of leadership in this process shifts in subtle ways.

It is unusual to encounter a person in a position of leadership who does not have some degree of vision. It is really part of the job, and we expect it of people in positions of authority. Unfortunately, this often leads to quite superficial visions imposed upon larger groups. There are two shortcomings in most approaches to building shared vision. One is that we forget the foundational matter of cultivating our own personal vision, the essential element of personal mastery and the creative orientation. The second is that most of us have little skill in creating the "container" in which people can explore together each other's visions and start to see the emergence of something beyond their individual vision.

The processes of building Shared Vision are, at their essence, processes of reflection and deepened conversation. Shared Visions *emerge*. They are not manufactured. All too often, the process is that a small group of people go off and write a vision statement. They then tell other people about that vision statement. But exceptional leaders do it in very different ways.

For example, I have met a few people in my life who naturally talk about their vision, but then immediately ask, "How does this relate to your vision?" They naturally create a space in which others are thinking together about the larger visions they care about.

"Creating a container" is the best metaphor I have found for this process. What I mean by it is creating a safe setting in which people can reflect upon what truly matters to them and speak openly about it.

Inevitably this process will embody the principle of Creative Tension: the gap between vision and reality. Creative Tension happens because when people really

start to feel a sense of safety in talking about what they care most deeply about, they naturally also reflect on the current state of things relative to that vision. Vision by itself, be it personal or shared, does not create the future. What creates the future is the energy between the vision and current reality. This Creative Tension is the essence of the discipline of Personal Mastery at the individual level. But it also is the essence of how we collectively go about bringing reality more and more in line with our shared visions.

Eisler: If I understand you correctly, a learning organization is not completely flat. I wonder if the distinction between what I call *hierarchies of domination*, which are disempowering because orders from above must be rigidly followed, and *hierarchies of actualization*, which are empowering and more flexible, is somewhat parallel to this?

Senge: Yes, I think the parallel is very strong. What we having been saying for many years is that the problem is not hierarchy per se. Hierarchy is an organizing principle we see throughout the natural world. It would be foolish to simply assume that hierarchy is bad. The problem is dysfunctional hierarchies. We become embedded in hierarchies that are based upon people hoarding power and imposing their perceived power on others. These are exactly what you call hierarchies of domination, and unfortunately, they characterize the vast majority of organizations, both in the public and the private sector. In fact, they are so commonplace that most people simply assume this is what hierarchy is all about.

One of my favorite books on leadership was written about forty years ago by a man named Robert Greenleaf: *Servant Leadership — A Journey into the Nature of Legitimate Power and Greatness* (1977, Mahwah, New Jersey: Paulist Press). In Greenleaf's famous writings about servant leadership, he simply says that the fundamental impulse required to be a great leader is the desire to serve others. So, in effect, Greenleaf turns the conventional or mainstream notions of hierarchy upside

down and says that for hierarchies to be effective, those in higher positions of authority need to be dedicated to the well-being of those below them, as well as to the realization of shared aspirations that come from the collective, not just from one or two individuals. I think this comes very close to your notion of hierarchies of actualization.

It is very important that we move beyond simplistic notions of right and wrong regarding hierarchy. They will inevitably limit us in ways that are really not necessary.

Eisler: Another principle, in fact a key principle in your learning organization, is Team Learning: the process of aligning and developing the capacity of a team to meet certain goals. Can you give examples of how this is achieved?

Senge: In the process of developing the collective capacity to both reflect and aspire, Creative Tension starts to be generated collectively. We have always found that the initial context in which this Creative Tension occurs is working teams – groups of people who need one another to get something done. It is usually an error to think about moving directly from the individual to the organization, because it is too big a leap of abstraction and scale. It is very important that people think about anchoring the culture of learning in smaller groups that can build trust and accomplish important goals.

In the business world, I would say a fundamental shift has occurred over the last two or three decades to recognize the transcendent importance of teams. It used to be that their importance was relatively unappreciated. Today, virtually everyone in the business world works in working teams; sales teams, product development teams, and cross-functional teams, not to mention the "management team". However, these teams vary a great deal in their capacity to learn collectively. Therefore, to approach a team as a sort of "living laboratory" in which to embed capacities for building trust,

creating shared visions, and learning what it takes to take action and learn while we are acting, transforms the way people think about teams. Ultimately, it is the accomplishments of these working teams that energize the larger organization and can contribute to deeper and broader cultural changes.

Eisler: Your final and overarching principle is Systems Thinking: Recognizing patterns and interactions that underlie systems, including both internal and external factors.

Again, this is a key part of my cultural transformation theory, which recognizes the interactive, self-organizing nature of living systems. Could you talk about that?

Senge: Well, my problem in talking about this is how to keep it short. Systems Thinking has been my lifelong journey. I started off with one transcendent interest: how to help myself and others understand the inherent systemic nature of our realities, whether we are talking about systems in a biological or ecological world or in the social world.

But I have also learned that the term "system" is limiting. People often hear the word and associate it immediately with computer systems, or with a sense of futility – as in the expression, "it's not my fault, it's the stupid system". Neither of these associations help very much to build a grounded understanding of what a social system actually is or why understanding it matters.

A family is a system. Any working team is a system. So, too, are organizations and interacting networks of organizations. Or cities. Or societies. We are often blind to the inevitable interconnectedness and interdependence of what we try to do in any setting. We sense them but we do not know how to articulate them. We feel that they matter, but then they fade into the background as we focus on tasks and urgent necessities. This is why Systems Thinking became the integrating discipline among all five disciplines.

Another way to say this is that everywhere we look, we find human beings working hard and producing outcomes that no one wants. Most people do not seek to create suffering in a family, and yet families consistently produce both psychological and even, tragically, in some cases, physical harm. Neither do we intend for our global industrial system to destroy ecosystems or produce climate destabilization, and embedded and growing poverty. All of these outcomes are unintended byproducts of the way our everyday systems function, whether they are the systems within a family, within an organization, or within our society at large. So, the reason why understanding systems really matters is not just intellectual. It is literally a matter of survival. Today, human beings have created webs of interdependence unprecedented in human history. And while these have created great benefit, they have also created enormous danger that literally threatens our future.

Eisler: You talk about challenging old, established ways of doing things – in other words, challenging authority and conventional wisdom. How does Systems Thinking relate to that?

Senge: Systems Thinking helps us challenge counterproductive assumptions about authority in a productive way. Rather than pointing fingers, it fosters compassion. We realize that systems work the way they do, not because of any one person's individual agency, but because of our collective agency. It is not that the people at the top of hierarchies are creating our dysfunctional systems. We are *all* creating these dysfunctional systems. Therefore, when we challenge the way a system works, we are not pointing fingers at individuals, we are pointing fingers at all of us. The wonderfully talented cartoonist Walt Kelly expressed the idea eloquently many years ago in his famous comic strip *Pogo:* "We have met the enemy and he is us".

Eisler: A key principle of Systems Thinking is that structure influences behavior, but that this is not a one-way process; we can also influence structures. Since people

often think they cannot change the system, or are fearful of even trying, what do you think are the first steps in changing systems?

Senge: Yes, this is a fundamental misunderstanding. People think, "Only the president can change the system." But this is because they use the term system in an incorrect way, to refer to the rules and regulations and formal organizational structures which often cannot be changed except by someone in a position of senior authority. But the rules that matter in any organization are not just the written rules. They are the day-to-day unwritten rules that govern how we talk, how we think, how we interact with each other, and our deepest beliefs and assumptions. In other words, the deeper systems are "the culture". And culture is shaped by all of us through our everyday ways of thinking and acting. Therefore, when you really start to understand the true nature of social systems, you realize that the first corollary is that we have created the system, and therefore only *we* can change the system. While there are different roles played in this process by people in different formal positions, the stronger imperative is to actualize leadership at all levels. Only when people start to perceive themselves as having this sort of efficacy do they develop a sense of responsibility to use their vision and talents to help the system evolve.

This can all sound terribly abstract, but in fact it is very, very practical. This is one of the reasons we always emphasize Team Learning as the natural laboratory for developing these skills. Teams will inevitably embody all the dysfunctions of their larger culture – face saving, avoiding talking about difficult issues that could embarrass one another, and kowtowing to people in positions of authority. But when teams start to operate differently – when they start to foster trust, collaboration, and a deep sense of mutual responsibility – this naturally filters into the larger organization as well.

Eisler: Research shows that people function more effectively in organizations in which they feel cared for. How does this fit with learning organizations?

Senge: The key connection to the theory of learning organizations is environments in which people develop a deep sense of mutuality and respect. I worry a little bit about the phrase "being cared for", because it can easily be interpreted as an environment that is paternalistic, where people are being taken care of by people in authority. I think that actually is counter to the idea of people working together to accomplish things they really care about. In such environments, people feel a deep sense of *caring for* what they do and what they are seeking to accomplish. They have a sense of personal vision and efficacy. They feel that they are continually growing and developing as human beings.

My experience is that in organizations that create this sort of culture, people feel deeply connected to what they are doing and to each other. In fact, this creates a sense of being cared for that transcends one person simply taking care of another.

Eisler: Another important aspect of the partnership model for organizations is inclusiveness, or valuing diversity – that is, including and valuing women and people of different races, ethnicities, sexual orientations, etc., especially in the business arena where you primarily teach. Does that fit with your learning organization?

Senge: From a relational standpoint, the first principle is about mutuality and a deep sense of co-creation; there is naturally a high level of tolerance for diversity. People feel they are connected in a common undertaking that assumes everyone plays a key role.

The other way that these issues come into play is through the discipline of Mental Models. When organizations are really committed to creating an environment of reflection, they are committed to each person's continually becoming more and more aware of taken-for-granted assumptions. No one describes himself or herself as sexist, or racist, or homophobic. But in fact these are exactly the behaviors we enact, largely because of unquestioned underlying assumptions and invisible taken-for-granted

habits.

It is precisely the process of making these habits more visible that undermines deeply entrenched biases and prejudices. This goes way beyond espousing being "unprejudiced". No human beings are free of prejudice. We all have biases, ways of seeing things that are just taken for granted, embedded in our upbringing and our personal life history. There are no saints. But creating an environment of continual reflection, especially in challenging settings and challenging conversations when we must confront the fact that our own biases are part of our problem – these are the ingredients for creating organizations in which people can continually discover and gradually transcend their inevitable prejudices.

Eisler: What role can scholars play in accelerating the shift toward learning organizations? What role can this journal play?

Senge: I believe that scholars can play an important role by helping people understand the depth of the changes required in this work. It is always easy for people to look for superficial quick fixes and to assume that good intentions solve all sorts of problems. While I think good intentions are essential, they are completely inadequate when we are dealing with deep cultural impediments. I believe scholars can show us this depth by writing really good case studies that show the depth and complexity of the change process, and by bringing out into the open the recurring challenges and issues that everybody must anticipate in order to sustain progress.

Eisler: Can you tell us a little about your most current work and your goals for the future?

Senge: For the past several years I have been spending more and more of my time working with extraordinary educators in primary and secondary schools. I believe that the depth of this work inevitably means it's long-term, and we all must find ways to "go upstream" into the formative institutions. Organizations operate the way they do

largely because we have been socialized into a non-reflective, linear, and submissive stance by virtue of our education. One of my mentors, Dr. W. Edwards Deming, the world-famous pioneer of The Quality Movement, used to say, "The prevailing system of management starts in first grade. Students learning that teachers have the answer. Students competing with each other to see who is the smartest. Students learning ultimately that you get ahead by pleasing the teacher." I believe that failing to see this connection between the culture of school and the culture of work is one of the biggest limitations to our ability to effect long-term change.

Conversely, we are gaining an abundance of evidence that children are natural systems thinkers. That we grow up with a deep awareness of interdependence and the natural processes of change in all living systems. School as we know it is an Industrial Age institution that evolved the way it did to prepare students to work in factories and other workplaces where their independence, autonomy, and creativity were exactly what were not valued. If we ever seek to bring about deep change to society, it's a fantasy to think we'll do it without deep change in education. It is the formative institution.

That said, we are surrounded by profound innovations in education all around the world once we know how to see them. Teachers learning how to be designers and facilitators, not deliverers of content. Administrators realizing that their job is to build a culture of continuous learning, trust, and risk-taking. And, in many ways the biggest blind spot, realizing that the key leaders in the entire process might well be the students themselves. Increasingly, students around the world recognize the disconnect between the reality they are living and the ground rules of the Industrial Age school. They know that this disconnect will only become greater as we grow into our world of interdependence and continual change that we can all see occurring. They are ready to lead the change to healthier, more sustainable schools and communities. But by and large no one is asking them or creating that space. We find when you create the space, the changes that unfold are quite extraordinary.

Peter Senge is a senior lecturer at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and founding chair of the SoL (Society for Organizational Learning) Council. He is the author *of The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization*, co-author of the three related fieldbooks, *Presence: An Exploration of Profound Change in People, Society, and Organizations* and most recently, *The Necessary Revolution: How Individuals and Organizations are Working Together to Create a Sustainable World*. He lectures throughout the world about decentralizing the role of leadership in organizations to enhance the capacity of all people to work toward healthier human systems.
For further information please contact the SoL Education Partnership
mailto:http://soledpartnership.org/
And Camp Snowball
mailto:http://soledpartnership.org/events/www.campsnowball.org/

Riane Eisler, JD, PhD (h), is a systems scientist best known as author of *The Chalice and the Blade: Our History, Our Future, Tomorrow's Children: A Blueprint for Partnership Education in the 21st Century, The Real Wealth of Nations: Creating a Caring Economics*, and other books and articles. She is president of the Center for Partnership Studies, and consults with businesses and governments on applications of the partnership model introduced in her work. She taught at UCLA and Immaculate Heart College, and currently teaches in the graduate Transformative Leadership Program at the California Institute of Integral Studies and through Center for Partnership Studies webinars. She sits on many boards and councils, including the World Future Council and the Club of Rome. She is founder of the Caring Economy Campaign and co-founder, with Nobel Laureate Betty Williams, of the Spiritual Alliance to Stop Intimate Violence. Dr. Eisler has received honors for her work for peace and human rights, including the Nuclear Age Peace Foundation's Distinguished Peace Leadership Award. For more information, please see: www.rianeeisler.com and www.caringeconomy.org

Correspondence about this article should be addressed to Riane Eisler, JD, PhD (h) at
eisler@partnershipway.org